Investigating the Effects of Different Degrees of Focus on EFL Learners' Vocabulary Learning and Long-Term Retention of Newly Learned Lexical Items

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Abstract

Vocabulary learning is a fundamental component of second language (L2) development, and various instructional approaches have been proposed to facilitate the acquisition of unfamiliar lexical items. One recent approach is the Focus Framework, which distinguishes three levels of attention to vocabulary during instruction: Direct Focus, Indirect Focus, and No Focus. The framework proposes that different degrees of attentional focus may lead to different overall learning outcomes. This quasi-experimental study employed a nonrandomized control-group pretest–posttest–delayed-posttest design to investigate the effectiveness of the Focus Framework compared with conventional vocabulary instruction and examine its predictions. Sixty-five EFL undergraduate students were recruited through convenience sampling and assigned to an experimental group and a control group. The experimental group received vocabulary instruction based on the three focus conditions, whereas the control group received conventional vocabulary instruction. Data were collected through posttests and a delayed posttest and analyzed using independent-samples t-tests and repeated-measures ANOVA. The findings

indicated that the Focus Framework outperformed the traditional approach in promoting vocabulary learning. Significant differences were also observed across the three focus levels. Overall, the findings contribute to research on explicit vocabulary instruction by demonstrating that varying degrees of attentional focus can generate differential gains in vocabulary learning.

Keywords: EFL, Focus Framework, Retention, Traditional Approach, Vocabulary

1. Introduction

Vocabulary serves not only as the most important language component necessary for learning, but it also plays a key role in the development of all the language skills and sub-skills (Dobakhti et al., 2020). According to Milton and Hopwood (2022), learners' overall language proficiency is very closely associated with their vocabulary size. Underlining the significance of vocabulary acquisition, Schmitt (2008) argues that nearly all researchers, teachers as well as learners concur that acquiring a substantial vocabulary is essential for mastering a second or a foreign language. That language learners must command a prodigious amount of vocabulary to perform certain language activities and communicate effectively is a consensus supported by different studies. As an example, Schmitt (2008) argues that effective functioning in the English language calls for a wide-ranging vocabulary. More specifically, second language learners need to master around 6000word families to carry out oral discourses and somewhere around 8000-word families for effective

reading. Therefore, the main obstacle for language learners in learning a second language seems to be mastering the lexical component rather than the syntactic principles of the language. Likewise, the lexicon is believed to serve as the heart of language comprehension and the key factor in the productive use of any given language (Dessalew & Laufer, 1997; Mohammed, 2024).

Despite the abundance of instructional materials aimed at enhancing vocabulary learning, the quest for effective methods to teach vocabulary has been around for a long time. For instance, Long (2017) holds that about 60 theoretical approaches and models have been developed to explain L2 learning. He argues that while most of these approaches complement one another, some seem to contradict the others. Therefore, the literature encompasses no single and well-established picture of how L2s can be effectively learned. In fact, due to the host of various factors affecting vocabulary learning (Zarifi & Mukundan, 2014), it is still unclear which methods or learning activities might lead to better learning.

One of the widely researched areas in vocabulary acquisition is learning strategies. The literature review, however, indicates that the current studies on vocabulary learning focus more on pedagogical tasks and different ways of task presentation than on learning strategies (Ellis, 2017). More specifically, the emerging research trend revolves around the issue of focus or the degree of cognitive processing required from learners in the course of vocabulary learning (Boers et al., 2017; Zarifi et al., 2021). To this end, some applied linguists have tried to pave the way for more effective methods of vocabulary teaching and learning by developing techniques for designing different pedagogical tasks that necessitate higher levels of awareness or cognitive load.

In order to maximize the exposure to L2 lexical items, Schmitt (2008) holds that vocabulary learning programs should incorporate both explicit and implicit learning activities. Put differently, the current research trend aligns with the learning theories and psycholinguistic principles that emphasize the significant role of learner awareness in acquiring a second language. Drawing on cognitive psychology, some scholars claim that noticing and attention is a necessary condition for learning. According to Schmidt (1995), the necessary condition for learners to convert language input to intake is noticing. In other words, learning does not occur in the absence of noticing.

Different learning factors have been found to have differing effects on vocabulary achievement. For instance, Nation (2017) underscores the significance of multiple encounters with words and engaging in profound cognitive processing as essential elements for acquiring new vocabulary. On the other hand, based on Zipf's law (Zipf, 1949), only a small number of vocabulary items in a written text tend to get repeated, and many others are only one-timers. Despite this, in a vocabulary-controlled text, every single new word is worth learning (Nation, 2017). Nation also argues that deliberate language-focused learning should occupy about one-quarter of the class time in any well-balanced language course. Accordingly, in order for less frequently encountered items to be effectively learned, they require some form of focused attention or emphasis. In the light of this observation, it can be argued that if some of the new vocabulary items are directly or indirectly focused on in any written text, the learner awareness of them is enhanced, and the need for substantial repetition comes to a minimum.

2. Literature Review

The literature encompasses numerous studies that explore the extent to which focusing on form or the message is likely to affect vocabulary gain. To begin with, Laufer (2006) compared the effectiveness of Focus on Form (FonF) versus Focus on Forms (FonFs) in acquiring new vocabulary items among a sample of high school-level learners of English as an L2 in a twophase study. In the first phase, while the target items were presented to the FonFs group as discrete words along with their meanings and sample examples, the subjects in the FonF group were asked to read and discuss a text which included the intended vocabulary items. In the second phase, the learners in the two groups were exposed to the target words along with their meanings and were asked to study them for 15 minutes. To investigate the effectiveness of the two approaches to the acquisition of vocabulary, the participants were immediately tested after each phase and two weeks later. Although the FonFs approach resulted in significantly better vocabulary learning, its impact on vocabulary retention was insignificant. In another study, Shintani (2013) examined the impact of FonF and FonFs on enhancing the productive knowledge of adjectives and nouns by Japanese kids. The target population included 45 novice learners of English that were assigned to two experimental groups of FonF, FonFs and a control group. While the FonF approach presented the target words in context, the FonFs approach involved explicit instruction of the intended items. In other words, the target words were presented in the linear sequence of present-practice-produce. Once the vocabulary items were presented through the flash cards (Present), the subjects were required to say them both chorally and individually (practice). Finally, they carried out some activities that called for the free production of the items

(Produce). The findings revealed that those experiencing the FonF instruction performed significantly better than both the FonFs group and control group. The results for the use of nouns, however, failed to show any difference between the FonF and FonFs groups. Although this study provides some empirical support for the effectiveness of direct focusing on the form and meaning of nouns and adjectives, it was carried out with complete beginners; therefore, the findings could not be generalized to higher-level language learners. Furthermore, Ramezanali (2017) examined the effect of two glossing techniques, namely video glossing and definition, on a sample of 132 intermediate language learners' short-term and long-term lexical achievement. She reported that the glossing technique proved to be significantly more effective in short-term gain than non-glossing. Glossing, however, turned out not to be equally effective in improving long-term retention of vocabulary. In addition, Boers et al. (2017) investigated the impact of typographic enhancement on the acquisition of multiword expressions among EFL learners. They offered the reading materials in three different forms. In the first form, many of the formulaic units were underlined; the second form included texts with only half of the units underlined, and the third form involved no underlining. They reported that typographic enhancement of multiword units would give rise to better recall than unenhanced lexical combinations.

Likewise, Soodmand Afshar (2021) studied the effect of task-related focus-on-forms (FonFs) on EFL vocabulary development with three groups of EFL learners. While Group 1 was exposed to definitions of the target words and some example sentences, Group 2 was provided both with the definitions of the words and the spoken form of the target words modelled by the teacher.

Finally, Group 3, besides what was done in Group 2, was required to focus on word parts. Data analysis showed significant differences among the groups with Group 3 performing better than Group 2, who, in turn, outperformed Group 1. Therefore, the researcher concluded that task-related FonFs could involve deeper mental processing and lead to higher vocabulary gains. Finally, Pouresmaeil and Vali (2023) investigated the contribution of incidental FonF to the acquisition of vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation in a qualitative study. They observed 12 upper-intermediate learners during eight hours of free discussion in an EFL class. For data collection, they identified instances of focus on form episodes (FFEs). Data analysis revealed that incidental FonF was effective in developing the participants' knowledge of different linguistic forms. Unlike the previous studies on incidental FonF, which mostly focused on its overall effectiveness, this study explored its contribution to different components of the language, that is, grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation. However, since the study was carried out with a small number of participants, the results of the study could not be generalized beyond the participants in the study. In addition, due to the small number of observation hours, the instances of FFEs with different linguistic foci were quite limited. In almost all of the above-mentioned empirical research, attempts have been made to attract the attention of the learners to the target vocabulary items in one way or another.

It is often argued that vocabulary learning appears to be a major concern for both teachers and learners in nonnative contexts. This happens simply because EFL learners, such as Iranian EFL students, have limited exposure to the language beyond the classroom setting. It is not surprising that they inevitably rely solely on teaching materials and tasks throughout their English

learning journey. As a result, presentation of new vocabulary items and the learning activities designed and presented by material developers and teachers can play a significant role because they can facilitate learning or conversely demotivate learners, ending up in learner dropout. Moreover, the extent to which different available strategies and techniques could influence vocabulary learning and retention still remains inconclusive. Consequently, from the research perspective, there is a dire need for further empirical studies in such EFL contexts to investigate the influence of different ways in which lexical items could be best presented to the learners. Therefore, the current inquiry was carried out to pursue this line of investigation. More specifically, it drew on the Focus Framework (Zarifi, 2013), as its conceptual framework, to compare the effect of the different degrees of focus on vocabulary gain, and to investigate whether the predictions made by the framework regarding the effect of focus degree hold true in practice. In line with these objectives, the current study was undertaken to provide some research-informed answers to the following questions:

1- Is vocabulary presentation through the Focus Framework more effective in vocabulary gain than the conventional method?
2- Do different degrees of focus result in different rates of vocabulary learning?
3- Do different degrees of focus result in different rates of vocabulary retention?

3. Methodology

3.1 Conceptual framework

The current study is informed by a conceptual framework, i.e., the Focus Framework, developed by (Zarifi, 2013). This framework involves three dimensions, namely Direct Focus, Indirect Focus, and No Focus. The model seems to share the underlying principle of Noticing Hypothesis (Schmidt, 1995), which posits that language learners are most likely to learn the grammatical or lexical features of a language when they notice them. Correspondingly, the Focus Framework places a specific emphasis on the influence of learner awareness and noticing on vocabulary gain. According to the Focus Framework, vocabulary items can be presented within each text in three different modes of focus, and each one calls for a different degree of attention. To put this into perspective, some vocabulary items need to be presented in Direct Focus. These vocabulary items have typographical features; they are highlighted (bolded, colored, slanted or underlined) in the written text or provided with glossing in the margin (Zarifi, 2015). To put this into perspective, lexical items like *hardware, go back, contemplate, log on,* and *awesome* in a passage dealing with computer are, irrespective of their semantic connection to the topic, in Direct Focus state if and only if they are typographically highlighted or glossed in the margin. Unlike in Direct Focus mode, the vocabulary items in Indirect Focus mode are not directly focused, but are "closely related to the topic or the whole idea of the text in semantic terms" (Zarifi, 2015, p. 130). For instance, words like *hardware* and *log on* assume an Indirect Focus mode if they are not directly focused in any of the possible forms mentioned above. These lexical items tend to appear in computer related texts simply because they fall in the same semantic domain.

On the other hand, vocabulary items which form a part of general context and are neither typographically marked nor topic-related are said to be in No Focus state. To illustrate the point, items like *awesome* and *go back* are assumed to hold a No Focus status in the same text if they are not brought to reader's attention through highlighting, slanting, coloring, etc. The author of the passage might decide to employ these words as some general words due to their fitness in the context not for their meaning association with the topic of computer (Zarifi, 2015).

The Focus Framework was validated by some applied linguists. First, Paul Nation found the framework "sensible" and clearly operationalized. He also stated that the three components of the framework "seem to fit into meaning focused input (incidental learning) [indirect focus], language focused learning [Direct focus] and Fluency development and meaning focused input [No focus]" (Nation, 2012, personal communication). Second, Jack C. Richards validated the framework, stating "This seems to make sense" (Richards, 2013, personal communication). Third, Stuart Webb expressed his interest in the idea behind the framework, commenting it can be "a study of value and could generate interest" (Webb, 2013, personal communication). Finally, O'Dowd considered the framework "sensible, clearly operationalized and well-supported in terms of 'noticing' theories for grammar". She also added that it "would have interesting practical implications not only for textbook materials developers but also for researchers doing textbook analysis and language teachers as well" (O'Dowd, 2013, personal communication). Although the Framework had previously been validated by the aforesaid well-known experts

in the field, a panel of three applied linguists discussed it for use in the present study and found it valid.

3.2 Participants and materials

The present quantitative research made use of a nonrandomized control group pretest-posttest-delayed-posttest quasi-experimental design to address the issue of the effect of different degrees of focus on vocabulary learning and retention. In doing so, a sample of 65 EFL learners out of a total population of 75 candidates, in two intact classes from Arak University, was selected trough convenience sampling. Their age ranged from 20 to 23, and all of them used Farsi as their first language. The target vocabulary items were presented to the participants in different modes of focus, as specified by the Focus Framework. Since 10 of the participants (seven from the control group and three from the treatment group) participated in English classes in language institutes outside *Arak University* at the same time the study was being run, their test scores were not included in data analysis. Therefore, the target sample included only 65 participants, with 34 in the experimental group and 31 in the control group. Although arguments might be levelled against the small number of subjects in the experimental group (34 subjects), Ary et al. (2014) hold that an advantage of repeated-measures designs is that they can be carried out with fewer subjects.

The participants were majoring in different fields of social sciences such as Sociology, Persian Language and Literature, Economics, and Politics. They were taking the obligatory General English course and were taught the third edition of *Reading* & *Vocabulary Development (4): Concepts* & *Comments.*

This is a best-selling reading skills textbook developed for EFL/ESL students with a basic vocabulary in English of about 2,000 words. The textbook consists of five units, each consisting of 4 lessons dealing with such main topics as Arts, Organizations, Places, Science and Technology, and Health and Well-Being.

3.3 Instruments

Two instruments were used for data collection in this study. At the outset of the study, Oxford Placement Test (OPT) was used to ensure the homogeneity of the students. The results revealed that the two groups had an almost similar knowledge of vocabulary at least at the recognition level ($t(63) = 2.78$, $p > .05$). In addition, a researcher-made 100-multiple-choice item test that was developed based on the vocabulary items from the textbook Concepts & Comments was used as a pretest. As some of the intended items were known by some of the students, the known items were ruled out for later tests. Then, from the unknown words, we developed a 45-multiple-choice item test and administered it to the target classes as the post-test. An equal form of the same test was also used as the delayed post-test. This test was validated by two applied linguists, and its reliability index was estimated by K-R20 as 0.94.

3.4 Procedure of the study

As the target words in the textbook were not presented in the manner specified by the framework, (i.e., with different degrees of focus), we set out to manipulate the reading passages in line with the precepts of the framework to address the participants' noticing and their subsequent processing of unfamiliar vocabulary items. To put this into perspective, for Direct Focus

form, the researcher first decided on the number of vocabulary items and then highlighted them typographically, (i.e., they were either underlined, boldfaced, or provided with a verbal definition in the margin). Regarding Indirect Focus form, some new vocabulary items that were semantically related to the topic of the given passages were specified for explicit teaching. Important to note is that these words were no longer typographically highlighted. For No Focus form, some new words which were neither highlighted nor semantically related to the topics were targeted for explicit instruction like those in Indirect Focus status. For instance, in the passage titled *Amnesty International*, the words ACCURATE, PETITION, and IMPARTIALLY were presented in Direct Focus mode as we typographically highlighted them in the text or we glossed them in the margin; the words SENTENCED, TURTURED and PRISONERS OF CONSCIENCE were considered to be in Indirect mode as they fall in the semantic domain of the text topic; finally, the words PUBLICITY, WITNESSED and AWARDED appeared in No Focus mode as they were recognized to be neither semantically related to the topic, nor were they highlighted in any of the manners specified by Direct Focus mode. However, all these target vocabulary items were presented to the students as new words since they did not know their meanings prior to the instruction. Having ensured the homogeneity of the students as established by the OPT test, we commenced the treatment which lasted for 6 weeks, each with two sessions. At the outset of each teaching session, about 15 minutes was devoted to the teaching of the target words. All the target vocabulary items were presented in the same way through defining, exemplifying in new sentences, giving synonyms and/or antonyms where possible in the two classes by the same teacher. In other

words, the instructional conditions for the two classes were kept constant except for the difference in the focus degrees assigned to each target word. The target vocabulary items were presented to the control class indiscriminately in the passage like other words.

After the treatment, the participants took the vocabulary post-test addressing the target vocabulary items. Two weeks later, the instructor administered the same test but with the items in a different order as the delayed post-test to find out whether the treatment would affect long-term vocabulary retention. It should be pointed out that in order to enhance the internal validity of the experiment, following (Ary et al., 2014), in addition to the control group, the "participants in the experimental group were also used as their own controls" (p. 310). In other words, because the vocabulary words in No Focus mode were presented to the experimental group just like the way they were offered to the control class, the performance of the experimental group in the No Focus mode was also considered as a control condition for Direct and Indirect Focus modes. More specifically, the experimental group was assigned to all the three experimental conditions and their vocabulary achievement in the three focus modes was measured. Finally, the difference in vocabulary learning and retention in the three different focus modes was calculated for each of the participants, and the average difference in vocabulary gain for all the students was tested for statistical significance, if any.

3.5 Data analysis

Once collected, the data were fed into SPSS version 20 for analysis. It should be pointed out that each learner in the experimental group had three score sets: one for their performance in Direct Focus form, one for Indirect

Focus status, and one for No Focus mode. To answer the research questions, the Welch's test and the repeated measures ANOVA were used. First, because the two groups did not include an equal number of participants, we ran the Welch test, a robust test of equality of means, to reveal the possible differences in their performances. Next, to look for any difference in the overall achievement of the participants on the three modes of vocabulary presentation, the repeated measures ANOVA test was run. Although arguments might be made against the small number of subjects in the experimental group (34 subjects), Ary et al. (2014) hold that an advantage of repeated-measures designs is that they can be carried out with fewer subjects.

4. Results

As mentioned already, the first research question concerned the possible difference between the effectiveness of vocabulary presentation, as suggested by the Focus Framework and the conventional mode. The descriptive statistics showed that the mean score of the learners in the experimental group (M = 32.47) was larger than that of the control group (M = 30.77). As the mean scores indicate, the experimental group outperformed the control group; however, this difference could not be interpreted as an indication of true difference in the performances of the two groups. Therefore, the robust test of Welch was run to ascertain whether the observed difference was of any statistical significance. The Welch's test output in Table 1 indicates that the two groups were significantly different in vocabulary gain ($F = 5.9$, $p < .05$), suggesting that the Focus Framework tends to be somewhat more effective for presenting vocabulary.

Table 1

Welch's Robust Test of Equality of Means for Independent Samples T-Test of Exp. and Cont. Groups' Performances on Immediate Post-Test

Statistic[a]	df1	df2	Sig.
Welch	10.261 1 62	.152	.002

a. Asymptotically F distributed.

With the Focus Framework appearing to be more helpful than the nonfocus model, further analysis was conducted to determine if different degrees of focus would work differently. As mentioned already, the experimental group took the same 45-item post-test like the control group. However, the participants were exposed to 15 of the items in Direct Focus, another 15 items in Indirect Focus, and another 15 in No Focus state. Therefore, their performances on the three modes of presentation were compared together. The descriptive statistics indicated that the mean score in Direct Focus state (M = 11.65) was larger than their mean score in Indirect Focus mode (M = 11.00) and far larger than that in No Focus state (M = 9.97).

The second research question addressed the impact of different degrees of focus on vocabulary learning. Although there appeared different levels of success in the performances of the experimental group under the three different conditions, to make sure that the observed difference was not due to chance, the repeated measures ANOVA test was run. Because the Sphericity assumption was established (Sig = .177 ˃ .05), we went on to interpret the F value from the Sphericity Assumed line of the Tests of Within-Subjects Effects table.

Table 2

Short-Term Learning of Exp. Group on Immediate Post-Test

Tests of Within-Subjects Effects

Source		Type III Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Focus	Sphericity Assumed	48.6	2	24.30	24.57	.001
	Greenhouse-Geisser	48.6	1.62	29.93	24.57	.001
	Huynh-Feldt	48.6	1.69	28.65	24.57	.001
	Lower-bound	48.6	1	48.6	24.57	.001
Error (Focus)	Sphericity Assumed	29.39	66	.44		
	Greenhouse-Geisser	29.39	53.59	.54		
	Huynh-Feldt	29.39	55.97	.52		
	Lower-bound	29.39	33	.89		

As Table 2 illustrates, tests of within-subjects' effects show that there was a significant difference among the performances of the experimental group across the three focus modes of presentation ($F = 24.574$, $p < .05$), with a medium effect size of $\eta 2 = .68$. Because of the significant difference across

the three modes, Bonferroni post hoc test was run to pinpoint where exactly the difference lies.

Table 3

Pairwise Comparisons of Experimental Group's Short-Term Learning on Three Focus Modes

(I) Focus	(J) Focus	Mean Difference (IJ)	Std. Error	Sig. [b]	95% Confidence Interval for Difference [b]	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
1	2	.853*	.175	.001	.412	1.294
	3	1.265*	.171	.001	.835	1.695
2	1	-.853*	.175	.001	-1.294	-.412
	3	.412*	.120	.005	.108	.715
3	1	-1.265*	.171	.001	-1.695	-.835
	2	-.412*	.120	.005	-.715	-.108

Based on estimated marginal means

*. The mean difference is significant at the .05 level.

b. Adjustment for multiple comparisons: Bonferroni.

As Table 3 shows, the difference in the learners' performances under the three focus states was statistically significant. In other words, the mean score of the learners in Direct Focus mode was significantly larger than their mean

scores in Indirect Focus and in No Focus modes. Likewise, their mean score in Indirect Focus mode was noticeably higher than their mean score in No Focus mode.

Another key concern of the current inquiry was to determine whether the employment of the Focus Framework would result in any difference in the long-range recall of vocabulary in comparison with the conventional model. The descriptive statistics of the scores of the two groups on the delayed posttest suggested some degree of difference in their achievements, with the experimental group having a mean of 30.68 and the control group a mean of 29.29; however, to make sure of any true difference between the focus group and the non-focus group, the unpaired samples t-test was run.

Table 4

Welch's Robust Test of Equality of Means for the Exp. And Cont. Groups' Performances on Delayed Post-Test

	Statistic[a]	df1	df2	Sig.
Welch	6.079	1	60.542	.017

a. Asymptotically F distributed.

As Table 4 reveals, the treatment group performed significantly better than the control group on the delayed post-test ($F = 6.079$, $p < .05$). More specifically, the presentation of the words with different degrees of focus as prescribed by the Focus Framework proved to be more effective than their

presentation through the traditional approach in helping the learners to recall the learned vocabulary.

To answer the third research question, and because of the observed difference in the performance of the two groups on the delayed post-test, we investigated the impact of the different degrees of focus on vocabulary retention.

The descriptive statistics illustrated that the experimental group scored increasingly higher with an increase in the degree of focus each set of vocabulary received. In other words, they performed differently in recalling the target words that were presented in Direct Focus mode (M = 11.03), Indirect Focus mode (M = 10.38), and No Focus mode (M = 10.21). However, to further investigate if the observed difference across the three modes was of any statistical significance, we ran the repeated measures ANOVA test.

Because the Sphericity assumption was met (Sig = .226 ˃ .05), we proceeded to interpret the *F* value from the Sphericity Assumed line of the Tests of Within-Subjects Effects table.

Table 5

Tests of Within-Subjects Effects

Source	Type IIISum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.

Focus	Sphericity Assumed	12.78	2	6.39	45.77	.001	*Long-Term Retention of*
	Greenhouse-Geisser	12.784	1.59	8.02	45.77	.001	*Exp. Group on Delayed*
	Huynh-Feldt	12.78	1.66	7.69	45.77	.001	*Post-Test*
	Lower-bound	12.78	1	12.78	45.77	.001	
Error (Focus)	Sphericity Assumed	9.21	66	.14			
	Greenhouse-Geisser	9.21	52.6	.17			
	Huynh-Feldt	9.21	54.844	.16			
	Lower-bound	9.21	33.000	.27			

The output of the repeated measures of ANOVA in Table 5 indicates that the mean scores of the participants' performances in the three modes of focus were statistically different ($F = 45.779$, $p < .05$), with a medium effect size of $\eta 2 = .58$. In other words, teaching vocabulary with different degrees of focus resulted in a significant difference in vocabulary retention. However, to locate where exactly the significant difference falls, the ANOVA test was followed by Bonferroni post hoc test.

Table 6

Pairwise Comparisons of Experimental Group's Long-Term Learning on Three Focus Modes

(I) Focus	(J) Focus	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig. [b]	95% Confidence Interval for Difference [b]	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
1	2	.647*	.093	.001	.412	.882
	3	1.583*	.107	.001	.553	1.094
2	1	-.647*	.093	.001	-.882	-.412
	3	.176*	.066	.036	.009	.344
3	1	-.824*	.107	.001	-1.094	-.553
	2	-.176*	.066	.036	-.344	-.009

Based on estimated marginal means

*. The mean difference is significant at the .05 level.

b. Adjustment for multiple comparisons: Bonferroni.

The pairwise comparisons in Table 6 indicate that the mean score of the participants in Direct Focus mode was significantly larger than their mean scores in Indirect Focus (Sig. = .001) and No Focus modes (Sig. = .001). This also held true for the difference between their mean scores in Indirect Focus and No Focus states (Sig. = .036). In other words, a rise in the focus degree on vocabulary items tended to give way to a greater gain in the recall of vocabulary items.

To recap the results, presentation of new vocabulary items, as specified by the Focus Framework, appeared to be more effective than the traditional approach for the presentation of vocabulary items. Moreover, as far as the different

modes of the Focus Framework are involved, the direct focus and/or indirect focus on the target lexical forms tended to result in a higher likelihood of vocabulary learning and recall than No Focus mode.

4. Discussion and Conclusions

This empirical study was undertaken to compare the effectiveness of the Focus Framework and the conventional approach in short-term and long-term vocabulary achievement. More specifically, the study sought to put to the test the predictions made by the Focus Framework. In other words, it aimed at determining the effect of different degrees of focus on vocabulary learning and retention. The findings of the study are multifold.

First, the study revealed that the Focus Framework works more successfully than the conventional approach in word gains. The treatment group turned out to outperform the control group not only on the immediate but also on the delayed post-test. To put this into perspective, both the direct focus and the indirect focus modes empowered the learners to acquire a larger number of words and to retain them for a longer time.

Second, it was found that different focusing degrees on new vocabulary items resulted in different rates of vocabulary learning and retention. As the Focus Framework predicts, the learners outlearned the new words that were directly focused on one way or another. This is in full agreement with Sharwood's observation (1993) that input enhancement serves as an effective way of raising student noticing. Therefore, direct focusing which highlights the items through boldfacing, slanting, underlining or glossing appeared to be far more effective than the Indirect focus and No focus states in enhancing the input and attracting the attention of the learners. Moreover, the learners

tended to recall the meanings of directly focused words for a longer period of time than the words which, though explicitly taught, were not directly focused typographically. It seems that focusing acts as a facilitator of vocabulary learning since it can direct learners' selective attention to target vocabulary items, which, in turn, would result in learners' noticing and vocabulary learning (Schmitt, 2008). It was also shown that word items which were related to the topic in semantic terms, that is, those indirectly focused, stood a better chance of learning than the items in No Focus state. This piece of evidence backs up Webb (2008) who argues that the presence of sufficient linguistic and semantic clues is one of the most important determinants of word learning. Similarly, the Indirect Focus mode causes the semantic association between words and text topic to consolidate and complement explicit teaching. In other words, explicit teaching by itself, as it happens in No Focus state, fails to provide all the knowledge that can be best available through typographical highlighting or presenting items in a semantic-related context. It seems that when language learners pay special attention to a stimulus, a new vocabulary that is more focused than the other words around it, their mind resources are activated to attend to its different aspects of meaning and use. This observation is also backed up by L2 acquisition research, which argues that a key point for language development is to pay special attention to certain features in the input (Gass & Mackey, 2013). Therefore, the findings of the study are almost in full agreement with the predictions made by the Focus Framework and offer empirical evidence in support of it.

Third, the study revealed that factors that are conducive to learning tend to be almost similar to those accounting for retention. More specifically, there

was a significant difference between the rates of short-term learning and long-term recall in Direct Focus, Indirect Focus, and No Focus states. In other words, the learners learned more word meanings and retained them for longer time in Direct Focus than in the other two states. Similarly, the learners acquired and remembered the indirectly focused words better and far longer than those in No Focus mode. By implication, a greater degree of focus establishes a stronger memory trace which, in turn, can lead to a more successful consolidation and stabilization of the learning and retention processes.

Fourth, the findings of the study back up some of the important theoretical assumptions ever made about the effect of attention and noticing on vocabulary gain. According to Noticing assumption, unfamiliar words can be more effectively learned provided that they are brought to the learners' attention (Schmitt, 2008). In line with this observation, the current study found that the participants performed more effectively in learning and remembering vocabulary items taught, using the techniques which called for a higher degree of attention. For instance, although there existed the element of attention to vocabulary items in No Focus state as these items were also explicitly taught, there occurred a low rate of the learning and remembering since the words were far less focused than those in Direct Focus mode and much less contextualized than those in Indirect Focus form.

Fifth, the findings of the study appeared to corroborate the previous empirical studies which argue for the impact of different types of focus on lexical gain and recall (Boers et al., 2017; Pouresmaeil & Vali, 2023; Ramezanali, 2017; Shintani, 2013; Soodmand Afshar, 2021). To begin with,

this study backs up Shintani (2013), who reported that FonF approach enabled the experimental group to perform much better than the other two groups in using adjectives. The findings also render empirical evidence for Ramezanali (2017), who found that the intermediate level language learners exposed to the glossing technique were able to perform much better than the non-glossing group in short-term learning. Moreover, the study provides some empirical evidence to back up Boers et al. (2017), who found that typographic enhancement of multiword units would give rise to better recall than unenhanced lexical combinations. In agreement with Soodmand Afshar (2021), the current study revealed that direct focus on vocabulary items in the Direct Focus state would lead to more fruitful gains than when they are presented in the Indirect and No Focus modes because the Direct Focus mode tends to direct learners' attention to both formal and meaning features of the lexicon. As already mentioned, the Indirect Focus mode which implies the meaning association between target words and text topic resulted in more vocabulary gain than the No Focus state. Therefore, this study also backs up Pouresmaeil and Vali (2023) who found that incidental focus contributed to the acquisition of different language components.

The findings of the study, nonetheless, seem to be in contradiction with the research evidence regarding vocabulary retention reported by Ramezanali (2017). Unlike Ramezanali, who demonstrated that provision of glossing could only partially lead to long-term retention, the present study indicated that Direct Focus, which involves glossing as one of its focusing techniques, was equally effective for both vocabulary learning and recall. This controversy should, however, be considered in the light of the fact that Direct Focus, in

addition to glossing technique, makes use of some other focusing techniques like underlining, and bolding.

To sum up, the current study has advanced existing knowledge and understanding regarding explicit versus implicit vocabulary learning (Alemán Bañón et al., 2020; Roehr-Brackin, 2024; VanPatten & Smith, 2022) to a new level. It revealed that while explicit teaching can result in larger gains of vocabulary learning and retention than implicit teaching, it is likely to result in different rates of learning and retention, depending on the degree of explicitness. To put this into perspective, while all the three forms of Direct Focus, Indirect Focus, and No Focus states involved explicit teaching, the degree of focus and thereby explicitness in Direct Focus and Indirect Focus modes was more than that in No Focus Form, hence better learning and longer retention.

The present study offers some pedagogical implications. The findings render further support for presenting vocabulary items in ways which require different levels of attention or focus from language learner. By directly or indirectly focusing on certain important vocabulary items, material developers and teachers might encourage language learners to get involved into a deeper level processing of new vocabulary items. Through typographical manipulation, they can also prevent new words from going unnoticed by language learners. If vocabulary items are presented in visually salient forms or in meaningful contexts, they will stand a better chance of learning and entering into long-term memory. Although class time does not allow for direct focusing on all the vocabulary items in a text, there appears to be a necessity for direct focusing on at least a few of the important words in each lesson;

otherwise, their deceptively apparent typographical similarities with other non-focused words would not allow the learners to notice the saliency of these words.

A few suggestions for future research can be formulated due to the limitations of the present study. This study aimed at the investigation of vocabulary acquisition and recall in terms of the predictions made by the Focus Framework. Future research can explore the impact of different degrees of focusing on other language components like collocational and grammatical structures. Second, the current study probed into how different levels of focusing technique might affect short-term gain and long-lasting retention among EFL learners; therefore, another suggestion might concern the impact of focusing degree on learners across different proficiency levels. Finally, future studies could deal with the comparison of the possible effects that each of the different techniques of direct focusing, i.e. coloring, bolding, underlining, glossing, etc. might have on the achievement of different language components.

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